

Chapter 2

Existing Land Use



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A. The Community of Stow

1. Community characteristics

Stow is a town distinguished for its beautiful scenery with agricultural uses, open lands, forests, and other natural resources predominating. Primarily a residential community, Stow still maintains its rural, farming character, although suburban uses gradually continue to creep into the landscape. The community comprises 17.62 square miles, which equates to approximately 10,711 acres of land when roads and water bodies are subtracted. The Town itself is divided into approximately 2,282 parcels of separately titled land. This figure compares to the 2,483 individual parcels noted in the 1996 Master Plan. In 1996, there were 50 miles of public roads within Stow; today there are 60.32.² These numbers provide perspective on how the Town has changed over the recent decade or so.

2. Access to Stow

The Town of Stow is centrally located in the eastern part of Massachusetts nearly equidistant from two major cities. It is approximately 23 miles northwest of Boston and 20 miles northeast of Worcester as the crow flies.

Local and state highways 117, 85, 62 and 27 provide access to Stow by connecting with major interstate highways I-495, 2 and I-290. The lack of a direct highway connection probably helps to maintain Stow in the relatively pristine state it enjoys and deters some of the trends toward ever-increasing residential development in the suburbs closest to Boston.

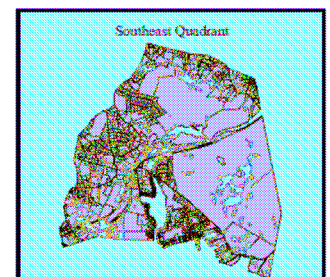
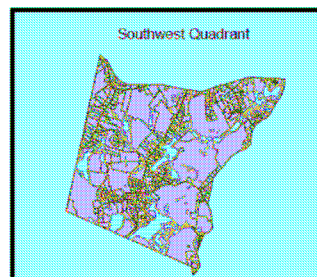
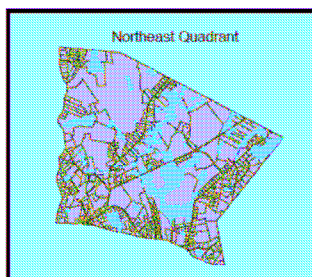
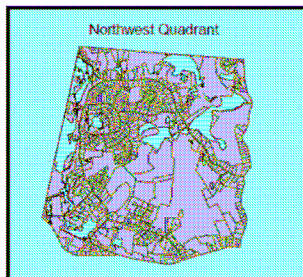
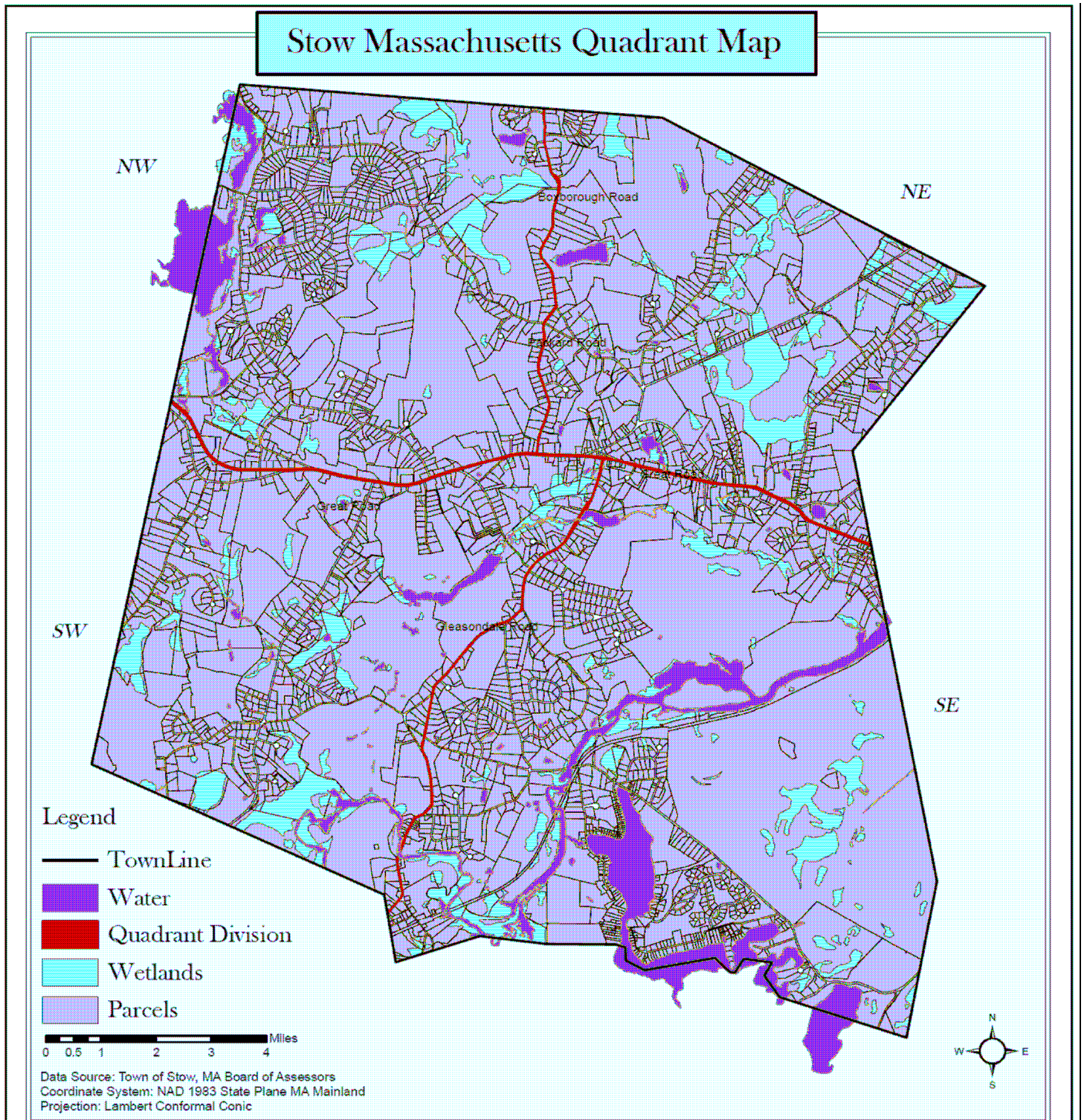
3. Quadrants

For the purposes of ease of discussion, the Town has been divided into four quadrants primarily along the major routes through the community. East to west, the Town is neatly divided by Route 117. South to north, the Town can be split by Gleasondale Road (Route 62), to Packard Road to Boxboro Road.

²

2006 figure as reported in the MMA 2008-2009 “Massachusetts Municipal Directory.”

FIGURE: 3 Quadrant map



4. Predominant development patterns

- The Northeast quadrant of town includes Lower Village, where most retail and service businesses are located, and parts of the Town Center, which is home to many of the community's municipal services.
- The Southeast quadrant of town is predominantly residential and open space. Within this area lies the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge, which falls under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- The Southwest quadrant of town contains the Gleasondale Mill area with its surrounding mill-style housing and other commercial and industrial areas along with a residential mix. The Open Space and Recreation Plan has identified this quadrant as an underserved area with regard to protected open space, as it contains more than 600 acres of undeveloped land with less than 100 acres protected from further development. This part of town also hosts several of Stow's golf courses. The largest employer in town, Bose Corporation, is located in the Southwest quadrant.
- The Northwest quadrant of town, which is the closest to I-495, contains the largest raw land areas, including some that have been permitted for development but not yet developed, including the Ridgewood Estates Active Adult Neighborhood.

B. Current Zoning

The requirement that a community have a Zoning Bylaw dates back more than 30 years and is laid out in Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40A. Stow's Zoning Bylaw is even older, having first been adopted in 1949. In Stow, as in any community, the Zoning Bylaw is critical to helping define, regulate and maintain the quality of life for the Town's residents. As much as any other municipal topic, zoning is an issue in which nearly everyone in town has a vested interest: it influences the aesthetics of our town, its industry, its population density, its tax base, its diversity. A town that gives significant weight to zoning decisions is protecting the health, safety and general welfare of its inhabitants.

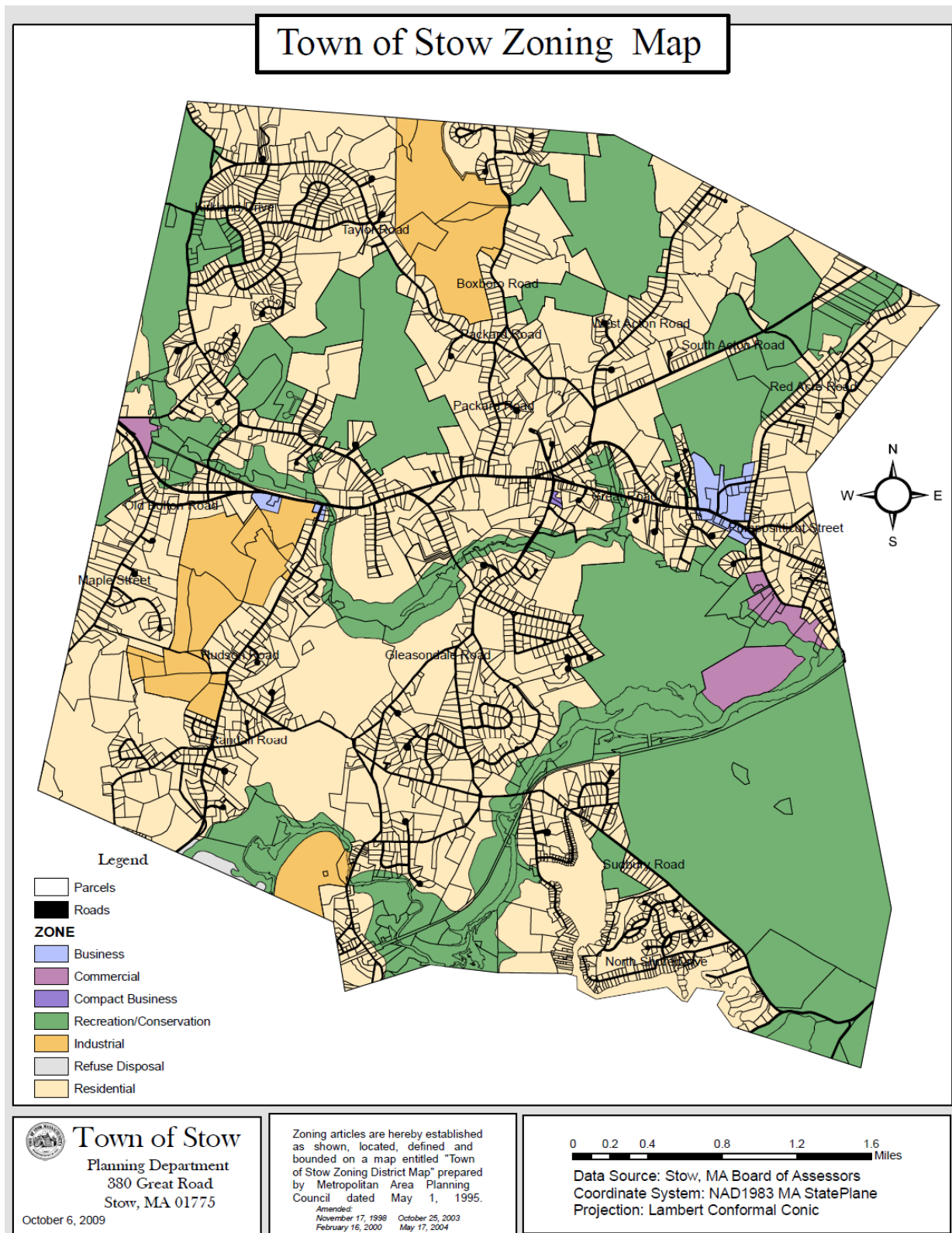
The Zoning Bylaw not only determines which parts of town are residential and which are commercial but also how nonresidential space may be used. For example, is an area or neighborhood zoned for retail, industrial, recreation, active adult neighborhood designation, accessory apartments, mobile homes, daycare, cell tower placement, adaptive reuse? The options for zoning are generally the first of the criteria that a business examines before considering locating within a community.

As a town and its inhabitants grow and evolve, needs inevitably arise for changes in the Zoning Bylaw. Oversight of zoning issues lies under the aegis of the Planning Board. Changes can be made, but not without due process and close examination. MGL Chapter 40A stipulates that a change to a town's Zoning Bylaw requires a two-thirds super majority vote at Town Meeting, to be preceded by a public hearing held by the Planning Board at least 21 days prior to the adoption of the zoning change. This is intended to give the public ample time to contemplate and respond to any individual's or business's wish to see a change made to current zoning.

The following page presents the current zoning map for the Town of Stow, last amended in 2004. This version reflects the Wireless Service Facility zoning put into place in 2001 and the Active Adult Neighborhood overlay district implemented in 2002. The reader should note that the permissible underlying zoning does not necessarily reflect the actual development patterns one would observe today. Many structures in town were built before zoning went into effect which sets up so-called "grandfathered" lots where the uses are allowed because they preexisted the zoning constraints. These are often referred to as "pre-existing, non-conforming, uses."



FIGURE: 4 Current Zoning Map



1. Residential areas of town

Residential uses are fairly uniformly distributed throughout town in a traditional style of development. Typically lots were carved out along existing roads in a pattern known as “ANR” (approval not required) lots. These lots are allowable as long as they meet the minimum lot acreage and have the appropriate number of linear feet of frontage along the road to comply with the underlying zoning. In accordance with state law today, the Planning Board must approve any such application for an ANR lot.³

The other type of residential pattern predominant in town is a traditional Massachusetts-style subdivision where new roads are primarily cul-de-sac connections off of main roads. Stow’s zoning code describes maximum cul-de-sac length and other characteristics of the new lots to be created. In this fashion, the lots tend to fan out from the newly created cul-de-sac circle.

The one notable area of town that has minimal residential development is the Southeast quadrant of town, where protected land, floodplains, and wetlands are prevalent.

Below are several maps depicting existing residential development patterns along with land areas that could be developed.

³ Owners of land must submit a plot plan prepared by a registered surveyor depicting how the new lot will be laid out and obtain signature of the Planning Board. This final ANR plan then must get recorded at the Registry of Deeds before the new lots are officially created.

FIGURE: 5 Map of existing residential use and zoning

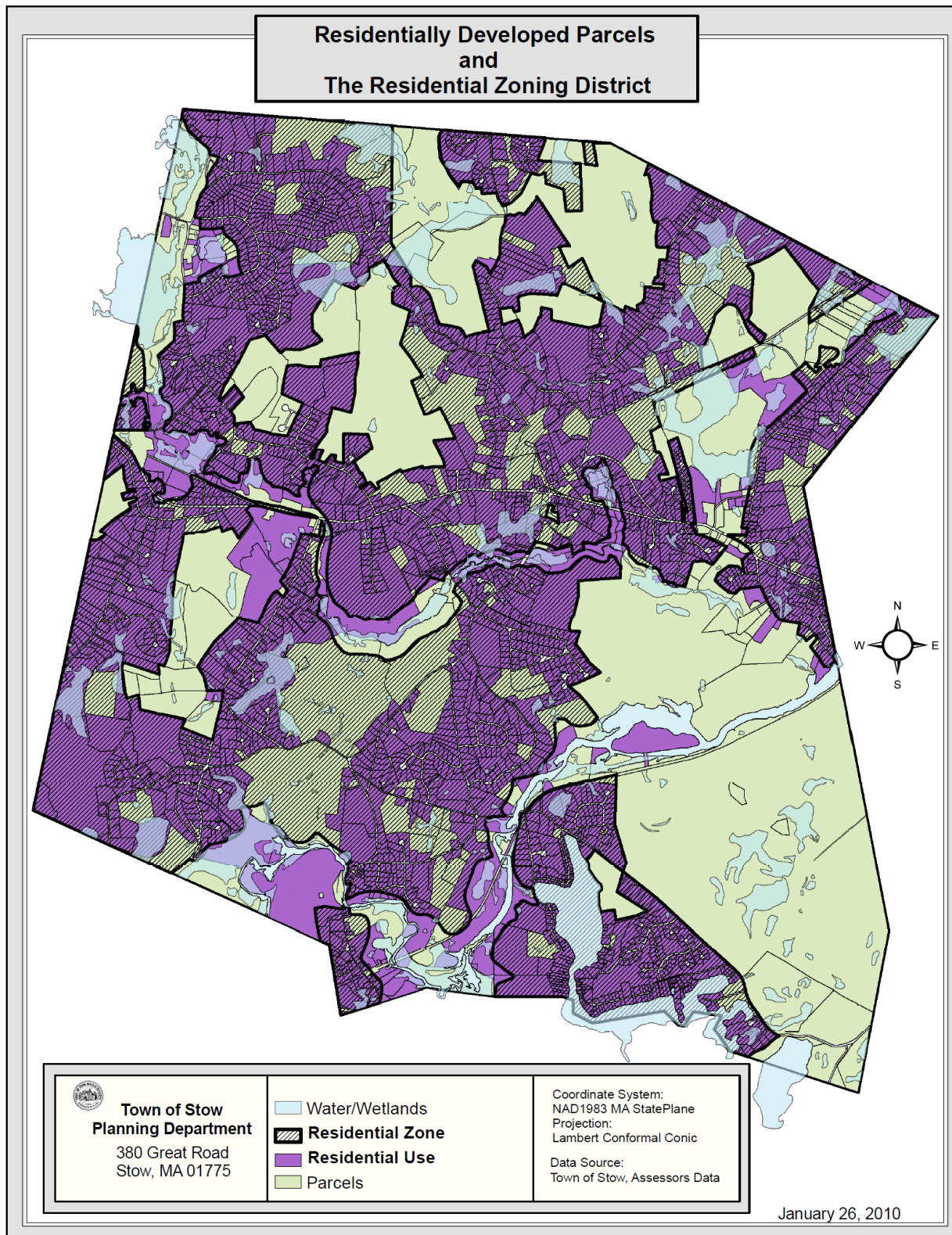
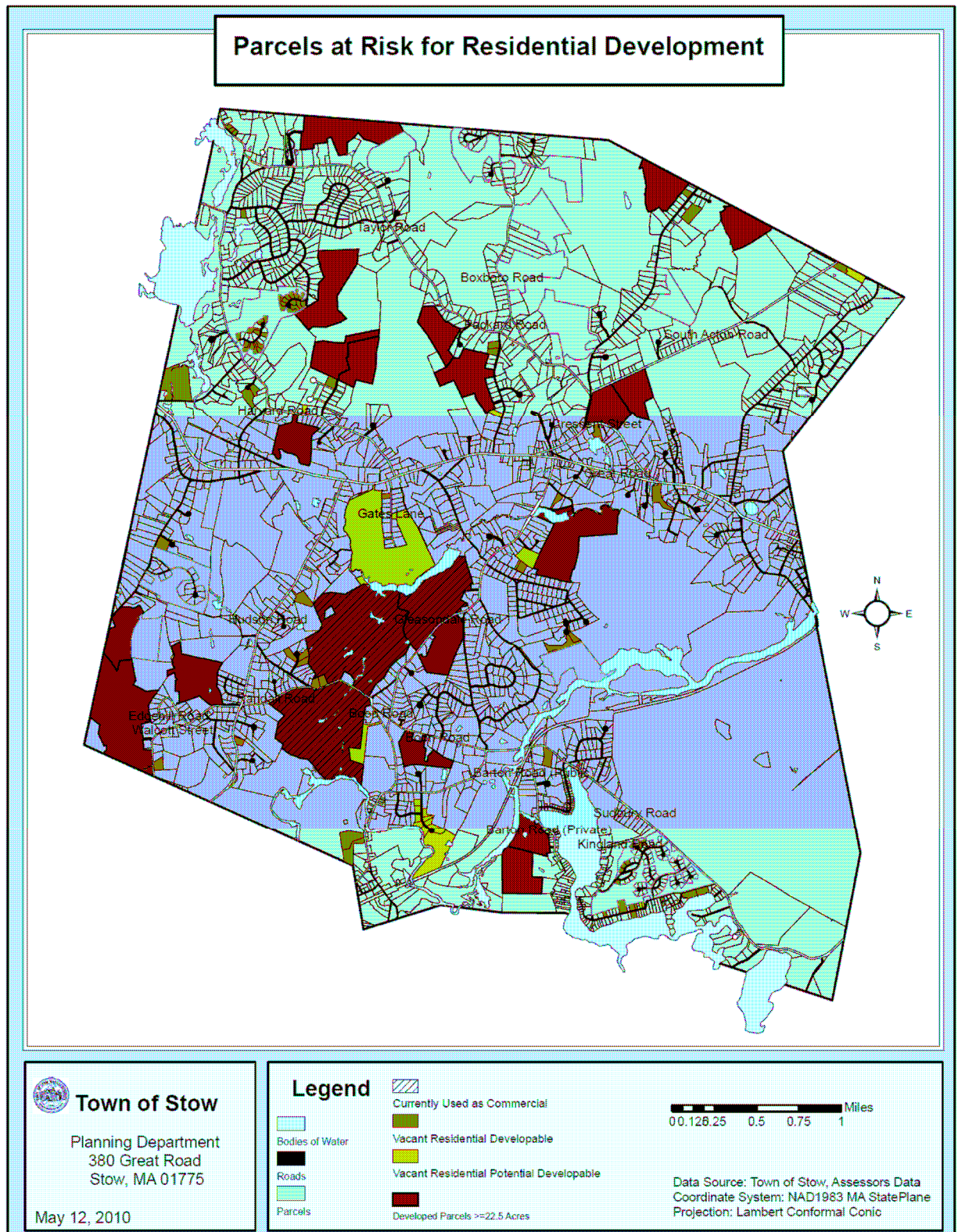


FIGURE: 6 Land parcels which could be developed as residential subdivisions



2. Commercial areas of town

With the exception of the Gleasondale Mill noted above and the Bose facility, there is minimal commercial and industrial activity throughout town. Most of the commercial activity is in the retail and service sector and is located along the major routes through town, most notably Routes 117 (Great Rd.) and Route 62.

Areas zoned for commercial development but not necessarily built out yet are concentrated in the Southwest quadrant around the mill area and, to a lesser extent, in the Northwest quadrant by the Stow airport. The Southwest quadrant contains a small strip of commercial zoning along Route 117 and Hudson Rd., some of which is still undeveloped. There is another small pocket of business zoning near the Maynard town line along Route 117 and in the Southeast quadrant by the Stowaway golf course and Astro Crane facilities.

As you can see from this map (red and yellow areas), Stow has relatively little land zoned for industrial that is presently built out with commercial and/or industrial uses sited thereon.

FIGURE: 7 Developed industrial land

This map also depicts in cross-hatching all the areas presently zoned for industrial use.

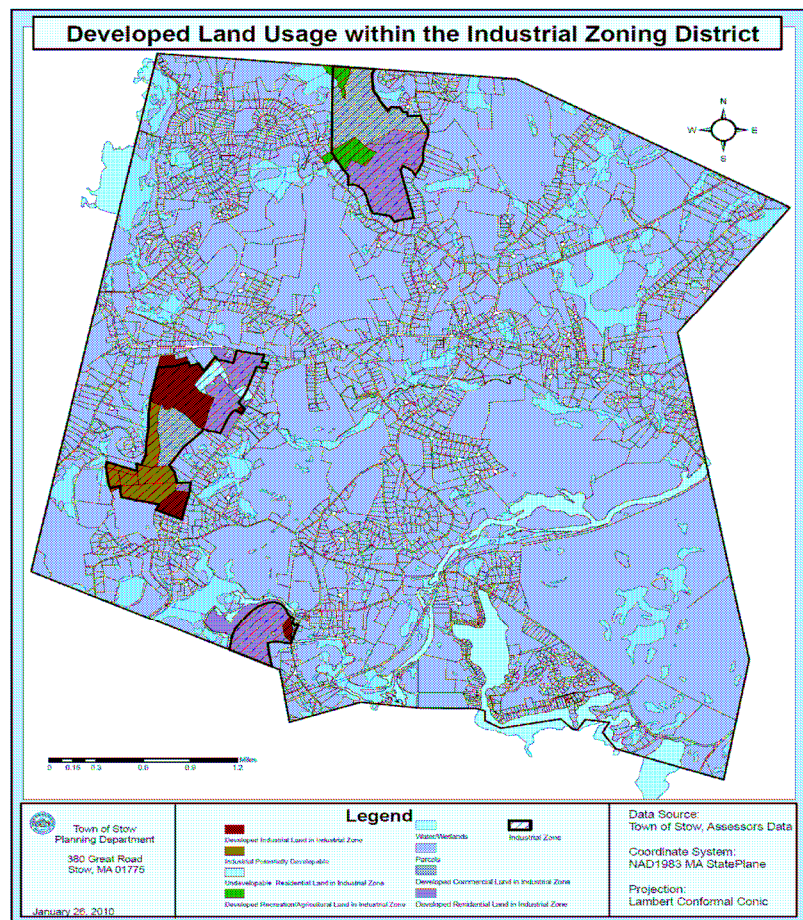
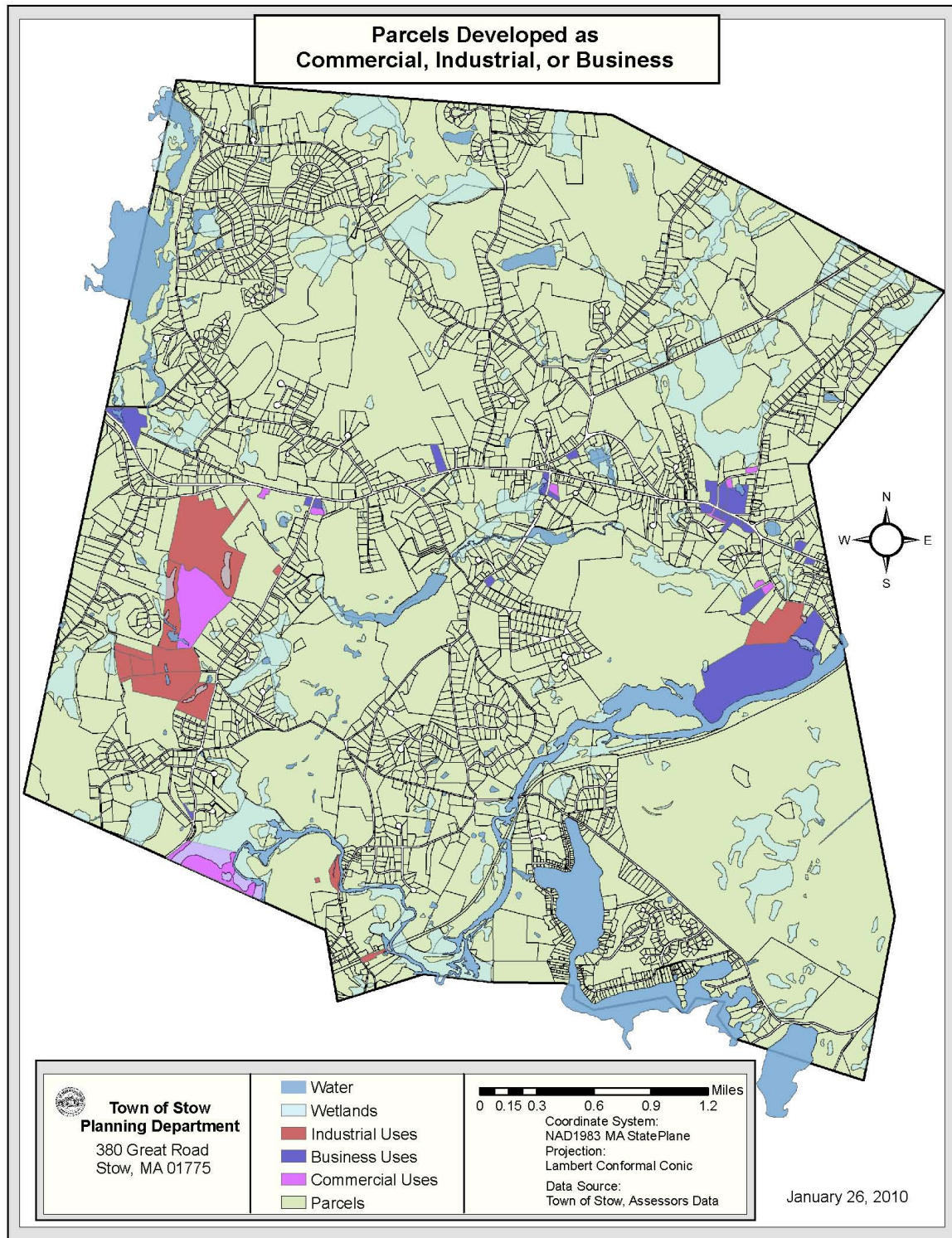


FIGURE: 8 Map of Commercial and Industrial Use



3. Open space areas of town

By far the most notable zoning district in Stow is the Recreation-Conservation Zone which dominates the Southeast quadrant of town but can be found in other quadrants as well. Distinct for its use constraints, it is an asset to the community in helping it preserve its rural small-town character and sense of open space. In addition, the Recreation-Conservation district areas provide habitats for a variety of plants and animals as well as aquifer and groundwater protection, and provide open spaces for agriculture, education and recreation. It should be noted that this zoning designation does not completely forestall the opportunity for development; allowed uses in this district are delineated in the Use Regulations of the Town's Zoning Bylaws.



FIGURE: 9 Map of key protected lands

